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ABSTRACT

This article describes Vermont's "Connections" project, a book discussion program designed to move newly literate adults from practical literacy to "literate" literacy by engaging them in discussion of texts and ideas in the tradition of liberal education in the humanities. The article also describes the Vermont Reading Project, a separate office to circulate existing programs and design new ones, and the "Family Reading Project," which engages parents in a discussion of the best examples of children's literature with the goal of encouraging them to read to their children. (RS)

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For the Love of Reading

BY VICTOR R. SWENSON

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THE INDIRECT APPROACH is often the most effective way to a goal, wrote military strategist B.H. Liddell-Hart. Although not directly advanced as literacy programs, humanities reading programs highly motivate people at intermediate stages of learning to read. How can the humanities play a part in overcoming illiteracy?

The Vermont Council on the Humanities tackled that question two years ago through its support of the "Connections" project, a book discussion program designed to move newly literate adults from practical literacy to "literate" literacy by engaging them in discussion of texts and ideas in the best tradition of liberal education in the humanities.

Illiteracy is a serious problem in Vermont. The 1980 census reported 94,000 people over the age of sixteen who lacked a high school diploma and 52,000 inhabitants who had not finished the ninth grade. The Vermont Department of Education estimates that today one in five or as many as 100,000 people in the state are unable to read and write.

In 1986 when the "Connections" project was launched, 4,760 people were enrolled in Vermont's Adult Basic Education program. Of that number, 2,795 were in intermediate classes with reading skills at a third grade level. The "Connections" project linked these intermediate-level students and their adult basic education tutors with humanities scholars. Book discussions were established for these students to explore two themes: "Thinking About Our Past" and "Thinking About Friendship." Each theme involved a series of three programs led by a university scholar at monthly intervals. Three books were assigned for each program: a picture book, a book at the third grade level, and one at the fourth or fifth grade level. Among the nine books included in each theme, three were difficult enough for students to need help from their tutors.

Discussion groups consisted of up to fifteen people, including five adult basic education students, their tutors, and librarians and observers. During the programs, which were held at libraries in Montpelier, Northfield, Bristol, Morrisville, Middlebury, and Rutland, the tutors and students participated as equals. "I didn't always know which were tutors and which were students (I liked that)," wrote one evaluator.

To prepare scholars and tutors for the special challenges of this program, a day-long workshop was held where participants reviewed the program materials and format and conducted simulated discussions.

In January 1987, I observed the final meeting of a history series on "America's Westward Movement," conducted by Marshall True, a professor of American history at the University of Vermont. The session's picture book, *When I was Young in the Mountains*, by

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Victor R. Swenson, executive director of the Vermont Council on the Humanities, opened the council's office in 1974.

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Cynthia Rylant, gave a vision of settled pioneer life. The third grade book was Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*, which describes Pa Ingalls' decision to move his family west from settled life in Wisconsin in search of the place "better further on." The advanced work was Louise Moeri's short novel, *Save the Queen of Sheba*, recounting the adventure of an eleven-year-old boy who saves himself and his eight-year-old sister Sheba from the wreckage of a wagon train raided by Indians.

True sketched the history of the westward migration and linked it to the earlier northern migration that brought pioneers to Vermont after the Revolutionary War. He explained how the three books related to the theme and invited discussion, which focused on the characters and how life in the past was different.

Evaluations of the programs were solicited from tutors, students, discussion leaders, and a paid scholar-evaluator. "I found these students more aggressive about their education than my university students," wrote True after his session. "They asked more questions, paid better attention, and were more willing to risk being wrong."

Julia Landry, director of the Central Vermont Adult Basic Education program in Morrisville wrote that two of her students, who weren't able to join the discussion at the library, read the books from the history series and asked for more like them. "One student, a fifty-year-old construction worker who became a reader in the last few years, is planning on reading the entire series of Laura Ingalls Wilder books," Landry reported.

Student response has been enthusiastic. "I never knew reading a book could be fun—I always hated books," wrote one. Another commented, "I never heard a person talk about books before. And I enjoyed listening to him talk about it."

The "Connections" project took root in 1978 when the Vermont council supported "What If You Couldn't Read?," a film illustrating the problem of illiteracy in the state. The film was shown widely throughout the state and, as council staff members became acquainted with the adult basic education network of tutors, we mulled over ways of connecting new adult readers with the humanities.

Since 1978, we had established reading and discussion programs in community libraries across the state. By 1985 sixty Vermont libraries had taken part in programs with attendance approaching 15,000. Through these programs, the council formed a working relationship with the Vermont Department of Libraries.

The rapid growth of these reading programs prompted us to join librarians and scholars in organizing the Vermont Reading Project as a separate office to circulate existing programs and design new ones. NEH provided support for the project three years ago and last year awarded a second two-year grant which, combined with annual support from the Vermont council, succeeded in bringing reading programs to 120 of Vermont's 246 communities.

One evaluator observed that, although the content level was not the same for regular reading discussion programs, "this is the first time participants have ever visited a library, read a real book, or discussed ideas about books."

The "Connections" project brought new people to libraries, provided the adult basic education tutors with a new, literature-based way of stimulating love of reading, and brought books, ideas, and discussion into households where they had never before had a foothold. Summing up the results of the experiment, project director Sally Anderson noted, "We learned some things with this project that we hadn't anticipated. Adult basic education tutors did not know how to use literature in the teaching of reading, librarians did not know what books to give adult new readers, and adult new readers are both verbal and motivated to read 'real' books."

Drawing from that experience, this year the council initiated "The Family Reading Project," which will engage parents in a discussion of the best examples of children's literature, with the goal of encouraging them to read to their children. Students in the adult basic education program and parents throughout the state will be invited to join humanities scholars in reading and discussing literature relating to themes of friendship, history, family, and courage. The project stems from a belief that no amount of grant programs for the preschool or elementary classroom can make up for the absence of parent-child reading activities.

By helping engage children in love of reading, the programs offer a promise of bringing whole families into the circle of culture and liberal learning. A tutor recounted this story from a student who loved *Ramona and Her Father*, by Beverly Cleary: "One evening she hadn't cooked dinner until 'real late' because she couldn't put the book down. Her kids kept asking, 'Ma, when are we going to eat? and she told them, 'as soon as I finish this book!' "

A Garth Williams illustration from Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House in the Big Woods.

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